

THE REVEREND C. G. NICOLAY  
WESTERN AUSTRALIA'S FIRST MUSEUM CURATOR

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The Reverend Charles Grenfell Nicolay was well known in Western Australia as a clergyman-scholar from 1870 until his death in 1897. He is especially remembered for his pioneer work on the geography and geology of the colony and as the founder of its first publicly owned museum, at Fremantle in 1881. His collection was transferred to the old Gaol building in Perth in 1889 and 1890, to form the nucleus of the original Perth Museum collection which by the addition in 1892 of the collection of the Swan River Mechanics Institute (formed 1860) became the Public Museum—later the Western Australian Museum.

Charles Nicolay was born at Cadogan Place, Chelsea, England, on 3 August 1815. He was the seventh child of Frederick Nicolay, clerk of His Majesty's Treasury, and Maria Georgina Nicolay, nee Granville. His great-grandfather, Caspar Nicolay, came to England from Germany in 1736 in the suite of Augusta of Saxe-Gotha, who married Frederick Louis, Prince of Wales. His grandfather, Frederick Nicolay, was the Principal Page to Queen Charlotte and was a confidant of George III; he was also a renowned musician and was known to Haydn and Mozart.

Nicolay was only two years old when his father died, leaving his mother with eight children to support, the youngest only one month old. She was left destitute and was obliged to petition the Earl of Liverpool for financial support. Details of Charles Nicolay's education have not been traced, but it is clear that he did not receive university training, presumably because of his mother's impecunious position. In 1841 he was ordained as Deacon in the Church of England by the Bishop of Exeter, and on 28 March of that year he was licensed to a curacy at Tresco in the Scilly Isles. On 7 June 1841 he married Mary Ann Raven, daughter of Henry Baldwin Raven, by whom he had eight children.

In 1843 Nicolay was appointed librarian of King's College, London, and he held the position until 1858. During this period he acquired an extensive knowledge of geography, geology, and history (presumably mainly through reading) and made the acquaintance of some eminent scholars of that period. He acted as chaplain of the King's College hospital for some time, and was lecturer in geography at the College from 1854 to 1858. He was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society in 1844, and retained his membership of the Society until 1866.

Nicolay played a major part in the founding of Queen's College, London, in 1848. This was the first institution for the higher education of women to be established in England, and Nicolay is regarded as being its co-founder with F. D. Maurice. He undertook most of the work associated with the opening of the College and in obtaining its Royal Charter in 1853. He held the positions of Dean, Deputy Chairman, and Professor of Geography and Ancient History. Nicolay carried out his duties at College efficiently during its early years, but by 1856 a good deal of dissension had developed between him and some of the female tutors and Lady Visitors, and as a result an official enquiry was held by the Committee of Education. It was concluded that a lack of confidence in Nicolay existed in the College, and that he had shown certain "defects of temper", in consequence of which he should not continue as Dean. Although he was asked to retain his professorships Nicolay offered his resignation from all his positions with the College. However, he was unable to find

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another opening and was humiliated at having to return to lecturing at the College during late 1857 and early 1858.

In March 1858 Nicolay was appointed chaplain to the British residents of Bahia, Brazil, and as a result finally relinquished his remaining posts with King's and Queen's Colleges. He was then elected as a Fellow of King's and an Honorary Fellow of Queen's, positions which he held for the rest of his life.

During the period 1846 to 1859 Nicolay published a number of papers and books dealing with geography, history, and social matters. These included "The Oregon Territory" (1846), "On the dwellings of the working classes in British North America" (1852), "A manual of geographical science, mathematical, physical, historical, and descriptive" (1852, 1859), and "The principles of physical geography" (1858).

The Church of St George in Bahia, where Nicolay became chaplain, had been consecrated in 1857 by Matthew Hale while on his way to Western Australia to take up his duties as Bishop of Perth. Part of Nicolay's salary at Bahia was paid by Bishop Hale. Nicolay remained in Brazil until 1867, when he returned to England on leave. Early in the following year the subscribers to the Church in Bahia resolved that Nicolay be requested to resign; apparently he had aroused the antagonism of certain British residents there. He was then left without a clerical position until 1870, when he was appointed chaplain at Geraldton in Western Australia.

Nicolay arrived in Fremantle on the *Lady Louisa* on 25 April 1870. He immediately interested himself in the affairs and natural resources of the Colony, and evidently impressed Governor Weld and the Colonial Secretary with his ability. Soon after moving to Geraldton in June he recommended that an experimental coffee plantation be established near Geraldton, as the climate seemed similar to that of some parts of Brazil where coffee flourished. In July 1870 Governor Weld authorized the setting aside of a reserve for coffee cultivation covering the Valley of Waggrakine on the west side of the Moresby Range. Nicolay proceeded diligently with development of the reserve, planting coffee seed from Aden, and later from Brazil. His son Frederick came to Geraldton from Melbourne to assist with the plantation. However, by the end of 1873 it was apparent that the experiment was a failure, and Nicolay recommended sale of the reserve. The only remnants of the plantation today are a small cottage built by Nicolay and known locally as the "Coffee-pot" (a corruption of "coffee plot"), a well beside the cottage, and a solitary fig tree (one of several planted originally by Nicolay).

In 1874 Nicolay accepted editorship of the *Perth Gazette and W.A. Times*. He endeavoured to retain temporarily the position of chaplain at Geraldton while carrying out his editorial duties in Perth, but this was strongly resisted by Bishop Hale, who eventually obtained his resignation from Geraldton. The newspaper had been bought by a syndicate including the Colonial Secretary, Frederick Barlee (who appears to have become a close friend of Nicolay's). Previously the paper had been strongly anti-Government, but under Nicolay this policy was reversed. He probably continued as editor until 1875. Later, in 1886 and 1887, he wrote a series of editorials on European political affairs for the *Inquirer*.

Between December 1873 and May 1874 Nicolay carried out engineering investigations on behalf of the Government to determine the feasibility of constructing a ship canal between Rocky Bay, in the lower reaches of the Swan River, and the coast. The scheme was intended to make this deep section of the river available as the main harbour for Fremantle. Nicolay was in favour of the canal, but it was rejected soon afterwards by a committee set up to examine the various schemes for development of the harbour. Nicolay's joint role at this time of newspaper editor and scientific adviser to the Government (said to include such diverse fields as engineering, geology, botany, astronomy, and conchology) was scathingly criticized in *The Herald* of 23 May 1874.

Nicolay was commissioned by the Government in 1875 to lead an expedition to investigate reports of coal in the bed of the Fitzgerald River, near the south coast. This appointment was condemned by the *Inquirer* of 11 August 1875 on the grounds of Nicolay's lack of qualifications and experience in coal prospecting, describing him as "whilom chaplain, whilom coffee-planter, whilom editor, whilom engineer, and the Fates alone know whilom what else". The opinion probably reflects the attitude of many in the colony towards Nicolay at that time. He found no coal seams in the Fitzgerald River area, although it has recently (1970-71) been shown that coal having possible economic value does in fact occur there.

Governor Robinson commissioned Nicolay in 1876 to prepare a "Handbook of Western Australia" to give an account of the geography, history, and state of development of the colony for the use of prospective migrants. The manuscript was completed in August 1877, but it was not published until 1881. This volume gives a comprehensive picture of the colony at that time and is remarkable for the breadth and detail of its coverage. During the '90's Nicolay revised the volume, and the second edition was published in 1896, a year before his death. However, this edition did not come up to the standard of the first, no doubt because of Nicolay's advanced age.

In 1877 Nicolay was responsible for the preparation of a report for the Intelligence Branch of the War Office dealing with the defence organization of the colony. At that time he was acting as curate in the Parish of Perth and as chaplain at the Perth Gaol. He was appointed chaplain at the Fremantle convict establishment in 1878, and retained this post until his death. From 1880 to 1882 he assisted Bishop Parry with the instruction of theological students at Bishop's College, Perth, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (in London) being responsible for his salary.

Nicolay was the founder of Western Australia's first publicly owned museum. In 1881 he was authorized by Governor Robinson to begin a collection of rocks and minerals which would eventually form the nucleus of a museum in Perth. The old Guard Room at the convict establishment was set aside for this purpose. It was originally named the Registry of Mines and Minerals, later amended to the Registry of Minerals, and finally it became known as the Geological Museum. The collection was transferred to the old Gaol building in Perth in 1889 and 1890, and in 1891 Mr Bernard H. Woodward, who was Curator to the Geological Department, was appointed Curator of this new museum. The museum was opened in September 1891, and in June 1892 the museum of the Swan River Mechanics Institute was purchased and added to it. It became known as the Public Museum and it included exhibits of geology, zoology, botany and ethnology.

From 1881 to 1889 Nicolay acted as geological adviser to the Government, reporting on various minerals sent in for examination and (in 1887) on the geology of the railway route between Guildford and Clackline. He also prepared a circular on prospecting for gold (1886) and published "Some notes on the geology of Western Australia" and "Notes on the Aborigines of Western Australia" for the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in 1886.

In 1886 he became involved in a dispute (through correspondence) with E. T. Hardman (formerly Government Geologist of Western Australia) regarding the incorrect labelling of some specimens deposited by Hardman in the Geological Museum. Hardman was scathing in his criticism of Nicolay, making it quite clear that he regarded him as incompetent. Nicolay's reply was dignified, stating that he had "never assumed the character of an accomplished geologist" and that his "knowledge of geology was, originally, such as was required for me as Professor of Physical Geography, the only one then in London".

Nicolay took a keen and sympathetic interest in the welfare of the Aborigines. His humanitarian views, ably expressed in the 1881 Handbook, were far more liberal than those held by the majority at that time, or indeed by many today. In 1878 he

was responsible for the Governor setting aside a reserve for Aborigines, covering 50,000 acres in the upper Murchison area. In 1892 he was appointed by the Government to the Aborigines Protection Board, holding this position until his death.

Nicolay died suddenly at Fremantle on 9 May 1897. His wife had predeceased him by 10 years, on 31 January 1887, after having been an invalid for many years. Some of their descendants, through their son Frederick, are still living in Western Australia. Their daughter, Sister Mary Nicolay, was well known as a pioneer of nursing in this State.

In Western Australia Nicolay's principal achievements were his 1881 Handbook and the part he played in the founding of the Western Australian Museum. Nicolay's mark in education and science in Great Britain was made through his part in the educational emancipation of women, in the founding of Queen's College, London. The years at Queen's marked the peak of his career, and it was a tragedy that he was forced to leave there. Nicolay was clearly a talented and scholarly man, who must have suffered through his lack of university education. The loss of his father at an early age, and the impecunious position of his mother, must have played an important role in moulding his character and career. He never seemed to have been deeply interested in the Church, but was essentially a humanist with broad interests in science. Despite his lack of formal qualifications outside the Church, he was able to adopt, with varying degrees of success, the role of an expert in many fields, from newspaper editing to geology. However, Nicolay apparently had the unhappy facility of antagonizing some people and, combined with his quick temper, this resulted in several personal clashes which seriously influenced his life.

Our research on Nicolay was carried out originally for a contribution to volume 5 of the Australian Dictionary of Biography, which was to have been published in 1972. The present article is slightly amended from one published in the Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Australian Historical Society, Volume 7, Part 1, pages 29-33, 1969, and is an expanded version of the contribution submitted to the Dictionary. Detailed source material is contained in file PR 5382, Battye Library, Perth, entitled "Reverend C. G. Nicolay—biographical data" by P. E. Playford and Isobel Pridmore.